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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to determine the effect on academic performance, if any, of employment on undergraduate college students. A questionnaire was sent to professors at 3 four-year colleges on Long Island (New York); various day classes were randomly selected. The final sample of n=257 represented approximately a 30 percent response. The completed surveys were approximately evenly distributed among the three colleges and represented a cross-section of majors and of year in college. About 35 percent were business students, and 65 percent were in arts and science, with a fairly even distribution of males and females. Thirty percent of students reported that they worked 10 hours or less per week or did not work at all; about 15 percent worked 10 to 20 hours per week; and the remaining 55 percent worked in excess of 20 hours per week. Analysis of the average grade point average (GPA) for students who worked in excess of 20 hours per week versus those who worked less than 20 hours found no meaningful difference. These findings are consistent with previous studies which indicate that neither working while attending college full-time, nor the number of hours worked, seem to have an adverse effect on a student's GPA. (RH)

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Employment of College Students

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the extent and the effect on academic performance, if any, of student employment among undergraduate college students. A survey was conducted at three undergraduate colleges located in Long island, New York. A final sample of n=257 revealed that GPA was largely unaffected by outside employment. Additionally, the number of hours worked during the school year had little consequence on the student's GPA. It was further determined that Business students selected outside employment that was consistent with future career goals, while Arts & Science students did not.

INTRODUCTION

The employment of college students is a concern for educators on many college campuses. Research has found the majority of college students are working in full- or part-time jobs during the academic year. Numerous students are juggling a full-time academic load of courses with twenty or more hours per week of employment. Many educators feel that students who work during the school year suffer academically as a result. It is felt that employment offers no academic value to the student and the hours spent working interfere with the student's ability to complete assignments adequately and perform well in the class.

While anecdotal information is offered to support those who feel employment during the college semester adversely affects the student, many studies have been done that have concluded the opposite. Additionally, some studies have concluded that even the number of hours worked during the semester does not adversely affect GPA. In a study, for example, of 464 community college students (Balunas, 1986), the number of hours worked was found to have a negligible effect on GPA. A study done at the high school level by Barone (1993), while identifying a slight decrease in GPA for high school students who worked, it also concluded that high school

seniors were better equipped to work longer hours with only minimal impact on GPA.

During the fall 1983 through the spring 1985 semesters, the impact of working on academic performance was studied (Van de Water & Augenblick, 1987). The sample consisted of full-time undergraduates enrolled in Washington State's public and private institutions. It was found that work, no matter how many hours worked, had no significant impact on academic performance and very little impact on academic progress. The best predictor of college GPA turned out to be high school GPA.

In an earlier study by the author (Goldstein & High, 1992), it was found that among college students, employment hurt Arts and Science students, but had little effect on Business students. The average GPA was used to measure the academic achievement of both groups and each group of working students was measured against a similar group of non-working students. The study encompassed nine colleges in New York and the final sample included 315 surveys from Arts and Science students and 247 from business students.

Studies done with pharmacy students, for example, found little, if any, difference in GPA's between students who worked and those who did not. A study of 201 pharmacy students at 4 Ohio colleges (Birdwell &

Excovitz, 1990), found no relationship between work habits of students and academic performance. In a study by Fjortoft (1995), it was found that first-year pharmacy students who worked performed as well academically as those who did not work. Data on academic achievement were obtained on a total of 199 students from three selected colleges of pharmacy. In addition to performing as well academically, working students were found to be just as persistent as non-working students are.

In a recent longitudinal study by Pascarella, et al. (1998), it was found that there was no serious harm in student cognitive development for students whose work hours did not exceed 15-20 hours per week. The study was a longitudinal study across three years and encompassing 23 colleges and universities.

THE SAMPLE

A survey questionnaire was developed to measure the amount of time full-time undergraduates spent working while attending school and the effect of that work on academic performance. The questionnaire consisted of two pages with 24 questions. Most of the questions could be answered using a five-point Likert-type scale. The final five questions were demographic in nature. The survey was then distributed to three different four-year colleges in Long Island, New York.

Various day classes at the three colleges were randomly selected and surveys were sent to the professor teaching the class. It was estimated, through a preliminary test, that the average student would require no more than five minutes to complete the survey. The surveys were to be answered anonymously and returned with a postage-paid envelope provided. The teachers were also assured of anonymity.

Of the 900+ surveys sent out, a final sample of n = 257 completed surveys were returned from the three colleges. The completed surveys were approximately evenly distributed from the three colleges. They represented a cross section of majors and year in college.

The final sample of completed surveys represented a fairly even distribution of males and females (male-125, female-132) and of year in college (freshman-60, sophomore-55, junior-75, senior-67). Of the respondents, 30% indicated that they worked, on average, under 10 hours per week, in some cases they did not work at all. About 15% worked between 10 and 20 hours per week, with the remaining 55% indicating that they worked in excess of 20 hours per week.

The sample represented a cross-section of majors and schools. About 35% of the sample were Business students and the remaining 65% were from the college of Arts & Sciences.

RESULTS

An analysis was done between those students who indicated that they worked in excess of twenty hours per week and those who worked less than twenty hours per week. The average GPA for the group working in excess of twenty hours per week (141 students) was 3.15. The average for the group working less than twenty hours per week (116 students) was 3.2. This difference was not meaningful.

A further calculation between the GPA of Business students and Arts & Science students, both of whom worked in excess of twenty hours per week, showed no meaningful difference.

On a question regarding how their work experienced was viewed, almost half (47%) of the respondents who worked in excess of twenty hours per week indicated that they would probably stay in the job, or a related position, after graduation. In contrast, only 20% of the respondents working less than twenty hours indicated that they would stay in the general area of work experience after graduation.

This item was then analyzed with respect to Business students versus Arts & Science students. In this analysis, 84% of the Business students working in excess of twenty hours per week indicated that they would probably remain in this job or a related position after graduation. The Arts

& Science students working in excess of twenty hours did not see their current job as something they would likely stay at after graduation. For them, only 32% indicated they would probably stay in this occupational area after obtaining their degree.

Consistent with these results are the responses to the opinion question as to whether or not the respondent viewed their work experience as being helpful toward their education. As was expected, an overwhelming percentage of Business students (92%) answered that they viewed their current job experiences as being helpful in their major, whereas only 20% of the Arts & Science students answered in this manner.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous studies, this study lends further evidence that working while attending college full-time does not seem to have an adverse effect on a student's GPA. While it is limited in scope, surveying only three colleges and a limited number of classes, it provides evidence that employment of college students is not detrimental academically.

It's also informative to note that Arts & Science students view their employment more in terms of wages earned and not as a career choice. Business students, on the other hand, tend to view their employment more in terms of a career choice, and as such, their employment experiences may actually help enhance their college experience.

Further research could concentrate on the type of employment chosen by the Arts & Science students. It would also be informative to question how the students view their college experience. Is it seen as only a stepping stone to a career, or is it viewed as a growing and maturing experience? Comparing the opinions expressed by Arts & Science students with Business students should also prove to be enlightening.

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